



## The Call of the Wired

By Sheldon Teitelbaum

**The Inuit are the ancient inhabitants of Canada's Arctic territories, a land as empty and inhospitable as Mars. They are about to cross the ice bridge to the 21st century.**

### Fort Providence, Northwest Territories, Canada

"Get on up here," commands Jeffrey Philipp from behind the wheel of his Ford Expedition. "We've got a date with an ice bridge."

Once the site of a trading post and Roman Catholic mission, Fort Providence, where this particular ice bridge begins, is about a three-hour drive from the territorial capital of Yellowknife, at the mouth of Canada's mighty Mackenzie River. Today, this one-snowmobile town is also known as the home of SSI Micro, one of the Arctic's major PC distributorships and the region's most aggressive Internet service provider.

A hard-drinking, salty-tongued businessman who keeps track of his nightly liquid intake by counting the swizzle sticks sheafed in his oversize hands, SSI Micro's 29-year-old founder and CEO is hosting a weeklong powwow of small ISPs from across the Canadian Arctic. They have come from as far afield as Inuvik at its northwestern edge, Baffin Island in the eastern Arctic, and Cambridge Bay on the southeast coast of Victoria Island. Their purpose: to explore strategies for survival in a telecom market that has emerged from its slumber by the frozen seas.

Philipp has repaired with his guests each night to his saloon (he also owns a sizable chunk of the rest of the town), and he demonstrates an uncanny ability to repeatedly shrug off the effects of the previous night's debaucheries. This is good. You don't want to cross the ice bridge in the throes of a 12-gin-and-tonic hangover.

Come to think of it, you might not want to cross an ice bridge under any circumstances.

Nearly 2 kilometers long and as wide as a four-lane blacktop, the Fort Providence ice bridge is a 3-meter-thick swath of shaved ice that juts south about 50 kilometers from the back end of the Great Slave Lake across the Mackenzie River. Built with Russian-designed water cannon, it serves as the principal thoroughfare for land traffic crossing the subarctic during the interminable winters (a ferry handles summer traffic).

Philipp (who seems fond of rattling greenhorn visitors) informs me in midstream that, despite its apparent solidity, this particular ice bridge is highly elastic. One can test this elasticity, he explains (while footing the gas), by driving across the river at speeds in excess of 45 kilometers per hour. Quick transit in a large vehicle can cause the ice to buckle, forcing a wave to surge across the bridge ahead of the vehicle. The wave boomerangs against the facing shore and comes crashing back. In some instances, this causes the ice to break and sends the vehicle plunging into the raging waters below.

Here, Philipp inadvertently offers me a handy metaphor for the new, digital Arctic now taking shape. My midwinter tour of the Arctic tundra is, after all, not just about an endless supply of fresh-killed musk ox and buffalo steaks, caribou cheeseburgers, and highly potent O'Keefe Extra Old Stock Ale. I'm here trying to make sense of what's going on in the bone-chilling outposts of that hideous Canadian cliché, the global village.

Forget Bill Clinton's "Bridge to the 21st Century." These northerners are busy laying in a digital ice bridge that, if it holds up under the strain, will sustain the Canadian North and its Inuit, Indian, and Euro-Canadian denizens as they trudge into the mainstream of the next century's information economy.

The digital incursions of the Great White (and nonwhite) North should not come as a shock. Technology, like humanity, will go where it can, which explains not only the nascent polar presence on the Net, but also the otherwise unaccountable physical presence of so many human beings in one of the most godforsaken regions on the planet. Indeed, without technology - and without the almost imponderable ingenuity that permitted human beings to fashion a tech-dependent existence with little more than bits of bone, skin, moss, and ice - no one in their right or wrong mind could possibly live here.

For the ones who have long lived in the frozen backwaters of this island Earth, the new digital realm offers a comforting (if culturally threatening) umbilical cord to modernity. For newcomers, it also offers an ersatz environment, an escape from the crushing physical, economic, and psychological limitations that have heretofore kept this place a hinterland.

In April 1999, the Canadian Arctic is slated to divide into two autonomous territories: the Inuit eastern Arctic, called Nunavut, or "our land" in Inuktitut, and a western rump that - despite a popular effort by local iconoclasts to have it christened Bob - will retain its original name, Northwest Territories.

Before this happens, however, the outposts, hamlets, towns, and cities of both entities will be linked, for the first time, to a high-speed digital network most US Internet subscribers would be happy to access. On April 25, 1997, the government of the Northwest Territories agreed to a C\$25 million (US\$18 million) deal with a northern-based, aboriginally owned company called Ardicom, which runs off Canada's satellite system. Ardicom's task, now, is to establish this network, via satellite and terrestrial links, with nodes in all 58 of the Canadian Arctic's population centers. Installation of the new digital network began last fall, and Ardicom plans to connect the first 20 of the region's communities to its network by year's end.

This is no mean feat. Canada's Northwest Territories boasts a land mass a third the size of the United States, yet you could squeeze its population (of which aboriginals make up half) into a large stadium. Its climate is almost as inhospitable as that awaiting the first human colonists on Mars. Extending to within 800 kilometers of the North Pole, the territories represent an engineer's heart of darkness - a technological nether region where the unadorned rubber, plastic, and metal underpinnings of the continent's currently configured telecommunications infrastructure would swiftly crumble under the inclement onslaught of sub-subzero conditions.

This is precisely what make the Canadian Arctic an ideal test bed for wireless networking.

The term for the Euro-Canadian power structure providing the impetus for this effort is qadlunaat, a mild pejorative whose literal meaning is based on the root word for "bushy-browed white men." The qadlunaat regards a high-speed digital route to the Net as a prerequisite for the proper development and governance of this isolated region.

The technical challenges are just half of the difficulty of truly wiring this region. It is the Inuit who dominate the eastern Arctic who stand to gain or lose the most from this effort. The remoteness of the territories they inhabit might provide some impetus to connect, but the Inuit regard the impending digitalization of the northlands with profound ambivalence.

On one hand, these people are accomplished technophiles. The Inuit were quick to adapt guns and traps to their hunting needs when the Hudson's Bay Company first made these tools available to them, and they remain rampant tundra techies, always eager to get their hands on the latest southern toy, from CB radios and snow machines to GPS devices and MSAT phones. If called on to do so, Inuit techno-aficionados can field-strip and repair their radios in the middle of an ice pack in a minus 40-degree Celsius gale using little more than a penknife. Before polyethylene sled runners came into vogue, the Inuit created an effective, if unseemly, mash of lichen, moss, and human piss called slider, which they then applied to steel runners as antifreeze with a polar-bear-fur-topped stick. Once a proper batch of slider was applied, the sled's runners would take off over the tundra like the legs of a crazed fox.

Equipment that won't crap out in the extreme cold is highly prized in the North: witness the proliferation of bright orange Spilsbury high-frequency radios. After making camp, many Inuit immediately run a pair of 90-foot wires from their tents to seal harpoons driven into the ice. By recruiting other radio-equipped travelers who might be in range of these makeshift antennae, they are able to relay messages as far as 1,600 kilometers away.

On the other hand, some Inuit fear the inherent openness of a less literal Net. Even as northern digerati suggest that the Web might serve as a repository for traditional aboriginal skills - hunting, trapping, navigating, and outdoor survival - now in danger of dying out with the elders, some of those grizzled experts remind that their willingness to

share information has left them burned at times. Southern visitors have ripped off all kinds of traditional knowledge, from parka patterns to insights into animal migratory habits to locations of mineral deposits, and, left with neither credit nor compensation, some Inuit question placing any traditional knowledge on any database accessible to others.

Perhaps the greatest impediment to widespread Inuit acceptance of connectivity, though, may stem from a gut feeling that using the consensual artificial environment called cyberspace to circumvent, and thereby overcome, geography is an exercise in hubris.

The Inuit, after all, derive their identity from the land they inhabit. They maintain a profound spiritual attachment to the earth that governs how they live on it, how they relate to each other, and how they regard the outside world. Geography is not seen as a hostile force to be beaten down or circumvented, so why would one sidestep the land by entering a virtual landscape?

### **Inuvik, Northwest Territories**

Inuvik is the largest Canadian community north of the Arctic Circle. Built during the late 1950s as an administrative hub for the upper Mackenzie region, this town of 3,700 lies about 1,080 kilometers northwest of Yellowknife and only 95 kilometers from where the Mackenzie empties into the frozen Beaufort Sea.

Geographically, Inuvik is more remote, and farther north, than most of Alaska. Residential apartment blocks here are shrouded by insulating, multicolored vinyl siding, and at 11 a.m., the bustling main street remains shrouded in the stark black of night. Socially and economically, it suffers from many of the problems common to the rest of the Canadian Arctic, notably a surfeit of familial violence, substance abuse, low education levels, economic torpor, and, from a postindustrial perspective, a lousy work ethic. One resident told me she would not send her adopted Indian son to the local elementary school because children suffering from fetal alcohol syndrome have been known to try to poke each other's eyes with sharpened pencils.

In terms of connectivity, however, the town could serve as a model for other Arctic communities. The schools here are wired, the kids are producing their own TV programming, the local community college is working out partnership deals with southern universities for joint distributed-learning ventures, and work promoting tourism and native crafts supports a local Web designer.

Inuvik also boasts the western Arctic's first teleconferencing center, which business folk and government functionaries are using to cut down on costly and time-consuming travel. Soon, the facility will be made available to educators.

The town's residents also enjoy some of the fastest home-based links to the Internet on the continent. About a year ago, the local cable company began offering modem links with its standard programming package. Owner Tom Zubko says that as media convergence takes hold in Canada, and as competition for the small but savvy northern market grows, consumers will require added value to sustain their loyalty.

Inuvik was the last Canadian community of its size to receive cable service. But because of Zubko, and also thanks to Ardicom, it has, in the space of a year, overtaken Yellowknife as a key force behind the latest effort to wire the North.

In contrast to the impoverished and underdeveloped east, the 41,000 people who live here and elsewhere in the western Arctic - roughly half of them members of the aboriginal Dene Indian, Inuit, Inuvialuit, Gwitch'in, Sahtu, and Cree nations, or mixed-race Métis - take their newfound connectivity in stride.

This may be because they have not, traditionally, felt quite as cut off from the world as their eastern counterparts. Thanks to the necessity of developing oil reserves found under the Mackenzie, the region is bound to Canada by a road system that Nunavut cannot match.

As for the eastern Arctic, there's no Mackenzie here to bind its far-flung towns and hamlets; no Dempster Highway to provide sport utility vehicles road access to the Arctic Ocean; no rail line like the one extending from Grimshaw, Alberta, to Hay River; no diamond mines capable of paying out huge territorial royalties; and no oil deposits impressive enough to generate the means to get at them. The eastern Arctic, the Barrens, is just vast tracts of nature largely unencumbered by human consciousness or enterprise.

The Inuit of the east responded to the crushing ubiquity of landscape by becoming nomads. The nomadic lifestyle, and the interactions made possible by frequent travels across the treeless tundra, fostered a sense of community while rendering the people who lived here less vulnerable to the soul-eroding ravages of the landscape.

Nomadic tribes and camps regularly traded information about weather conditions, the migratory behavior of the animals that sustained them, and changing government regulations pertaining to where they could live and what they could hunt. Its members, not incidentally, distinguished themselves as inveterate gossips tasked with sustaining a pan-Arctic database of personal information that was relatively easy to access and update.

When Ottawa's mandarins decided that the Inuit would be better off living sedentary lives, the powers that be established a series of tiny, scattered communities in remote areas where Canadian sovereignty might otherwise be called into question. And so the Inuit, many of whom were forcibly relocated to these outposts, suddenly found themselves grappling with new forms of electronic communications.

With the outbreak of World War II and then the Cold War, a rudimentary Arctic communications infrastructure became as much a priority for the US and Canada as it had been for the Inuit.

The earliest communications in the Arctic were maintained through high-frequency radio broadcasts used mostly for business or emergencies. Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC) public radio broadcasts reached some parts of the North as early as the 1920s, but were in English, and hence of marginal use to most aboriginals, who spoke various dialects. Inuit-language broadcasts did not begin until 1960, and by 1972 accounted for only 17 percent of all transmissions by the CBC's Northern Service.

Not that Arctic aboriginals didn't find ways to adapt southern broadcasting, when they had access to it, to their own uses. Before universal telephone access, for instance, radio hit-parade shows let aboriginals pass information along to distant friends and relatives via phoned-in song dedications that included lengthy bulletins detailing the caller's personal news.

During the 1980s, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission urged a northern communications policy predicated on native participation. By 1983, the most remote areas could receive CBC television transmissions. By 1995, they were also accessing a gamut of cable broadcasting. (The northern aboriginals have appropriated TV to bolster native languages, promote a stronger sense of community among far-flung settlements, and create the political awareness needed to attain greater self-rule in the new Inuit territory of Nunavut.)

However, when it came to accessing the Net, the North remained a hopeless backwater. The territorial government, for its part, relied on an outmoded legacy computer system to administer the Arctic. But the telecommunications infrastructure in the east was so primitive that officials had to fly tapes out from Yellowknife a few times a week to their regional offices. More recent data-transmission conduits were so slow and unwieldy that some functionaries considered demanding additional hardship pay to use them.

Private users, meanwhile - mostly qadlunaaq businesses and professionals - found themselves forced to subsidize the regional telecom's exorbitant long distance rates by dialing out to AOL or CompuServe in Edmonton, Alberta. In 1994, though, a group of Yellowknife technoids formed a nonprofit regional society called NTnet, which established links to the Canadian backbone, CA\*net. These links are now used by government agencies, businesses, and individuals.

In May 1996, the bandwidth-hungry territorial government released a request for proposals calling for the timely and cost-efficient establishment of a digital communications network. The winning consortium would preferably be northern-based and aboriginal-owned, committed to establishing nodes in the smallest communities, and prepared to finish the job by April 1999. It would have to guarantee initial access to government, education, and medical facilities in each community over a bandwidth of 384 Kbps.

Not everyone in the North, at first, will be able to avail themselves of the new digital access nodes. The northern Net remains a largely qadlunaaq domain. Computers have been simply too expensive - and per-capita income among native populations too low - to make home-based PCs an option for most northern aboriginals. And so, the online realm may continue to be off-putting to those indigenes who have not developed trust for computers.

Older aboriginals may continue to identify computers with bushy-browed white-guy bureaucrats. But youngsters are learning to use them in school, and kids out of high school now find themselves being tagged for training as

technicians and programmers.

## **Iqaluit, Baffin Island, Northwest Territories**

Baffin Island lies four and a half hours northeast of Yellowknife by air. This makes it closer to Danish Greenland, a few hundred kilometers directly northeast, than to the nearest Canadian metropolis, Montreal, roughly 2,000 air kilometers to the south - in other words, as far away from Montreal as Miami Beach.

With a population of 4,100, Iqaluit has long been the hub for transportation and administration in the eastern Arctic. In two years, Iqaluit is also slated to become Nunavut's capital.

Though riven by the same cracks and fissures modernity has created elsewhere in the Canadian Arctic, Iqaluit is home to a coterie of digitally astute aboriginals now busily scouting out the digital ice bridge on behalf of the as-yet unwired majority. Some, like Adamee Itorcheak, Iqaluit's main ISP, appear to have staked out a middle ground linking a nomadic past and a (virtual) nomadic present made possible on the Web.

One book about Baffin Island likens the town to the world's first moonbase. Iqaluit certainly has its share of behemoth futuristic architectural constructs - government buildings and other facilities that sit astride an antennae-spiked lunar ridge overlooking the town. Meanwhile, Iqaluit proper boasts drafty igloos and prefabs connected by a twisted morass of aluminum siding, heating and power ducts, thin black pipes, and satellite dishes.

Built on an old Inuit fishing camp, during the Cold War Iqaluit was home to a US-built landing field for Galaxy-class transports. (The area was seen as a stepping-stone for military transport to Europe - via Greenland - in the event of a Soviet invasion of Europe.)

With the demise of the Russian threat, the town became a dumping ground for nearly every kind of polar flotsam, including fish skeletons, offal from butchered game, dog excreta, and occasional bags of human waste inadvertently left by the trucks assigned to haul them. With the exception of the immediate surface, which thaws out long enough for the winter's accumulation of filth to begin fermenting in the summer breeze, the ground remains permanently frozen.

Any technoid tour of Iqaluit must begin with a visit to Adamee Itorcheak. The 32-year-old Inuk who a few years ago took over local Internet service is reputedly one of the most extensively connected - in both hardware and wetware - of Baffin Island's inhabitants.

Perched high on a hill overlooking Frobisher Bay, Adamee's spacious home, which he built with his son, boasts most of the modern amenities we take for granted. There is indoor plumbing, central heating, and a color TV in the living room piping out Disney movies from the local cable provider.

His son's room has a PC with an open link to the Web. The kitchen features an ice-making refrigerator and a meat-thawing microwave. And lined up on a shelf next to the tea and sugar are CB and high-frequency radios, a fairly expensive short-wave set, a cell phone, a GPS device, and a pager.

Adamee traces his lineage to some of the earliest residents of Iqaluit, including his great-grandfather, Soudlou (Inuktitut for "salmon"). His grandfather, Nabluq, an Anglican lay reader, was one of the first Christian converts on Baffin Island. Adamee's father, now in his fifties, grew up in snow houses, skin tents, and sod huts.

In a sense, Adamee casts himself in his grandfather's image, at least in terms of his openness to new ideas. Yet even die-hard technophiles like Adamee view the North's impending digitalization unromantically. Though the Net provides his livelihood, it does not offer a venue for real life. And as I discover while tooling around Iqaluit on the back of his snowmobile, Adamee would rather network with his customers on the streets and in the town's restaurants, stores, and bars than in one of the chat rooms he's set up on his Internet service, Nunanet. The cold doesn't bother him. Not being able to eyeball the person he's schmoozing with does.

"We stick to basics," he explains. "My parents came in to town by dogsled. The next day, they left by Ski-Doo. But a few miles from here, they break down. They already got rid of the dogs. That's when they realize this new technology is great - when it works."

When it doesn't - and up here, even a brief power outage could devolve into a life-threatening situation - it's nice to

know that the locals are handy with a screwdriver. Adamee became an Internet service provider after six and a half years effecting repairs throughout the Arctic for Bell Canada. But hardwiring the tundra is only half the battle. There's also the matter of running the networks, and in this regard, Adamee is not yet the epitome of the digital indigene.

"I still don't know computers that much," he says. "I don't have the patience. My staff is qadlunaaq - I hire the smart ones. Most of my customers are qadlunaaq. Maybe 10 to 20 percent are Inuit.

"You need constant exposure to the technology to become comfortably digital. I started out in school with the Apple II. Then the Commodore 64 came, and you could write your own programs. I started that in grade eight. The games were what caught our attention. But the students in schools here are a lot more wired than we were. You should see the kids behind us. They are going to be the mindblowers."

Alas, not everyone anticipates having their minds blown with quite the same enthusiasm. I discover this talking to Jim Bell and Deborah Qitsualik, who invite me to their home to discuss their own attempts to come to terms with information technology. Their doubts about the New Technology do not derive from the fear that enhanced connectivity will expose a besieged and vulnerable culture to dangerous ideas. For them, the problem isn't that the digital revolution is proceeding too quickly, threatening to overrun Inuit society, language, or self-esteem. Their problem, rather, is that the current state of digital technology may be too retro.

Jim is a 44-year-old writer of Scottish descent who manages the Web site for Iqaluit's weekly newspaper, the Nunatsiaq News. Deborah, his companion, is a young Inuk woman with clear, penetrating eyes and one of the most dazzling smiles I have ever seen.

On a plywood worktable in the living room, Jim is unpacking a new Performa 6400. A little surprised to find such opulence here, considering the threadbare furniture and shabby walls, I compliment Deborah on the acquisition. Surely it must be neat being able to surf the Net when it's just too cold to go out. "The Inuit have their own web," she sniffs. "I don't need a computer to know what's happening."

Deborah Qitsualik, I learn, has relatives in Iqaluit, Cape Dorset, Pond Inlet, Pangnirtung, Rankin Inlet, Yellowknife, northern Quebec, Fort Smith, Gjoa Haven, Ottawa, the western Canadian Arctic, and Alaska. Through word of mouth, she knows what's going on with most of them within surprisingly short order.

"It's never been Inuk to make money," says Deborah, reaffirming the Inuit view that material prosperity only proves a person hard-working and reliable. "You get rich by gathering information person-to-person. The Inuit believe you can't help but be impacted or changed or made better in some way because you talked to another person."

This expanding circle of affiliations creates a profound sense of communal regard and responsibility. Deborah is hard put to imagine how a computer can contribute positively to Inuit well-being. The Web, for her, exists as a vast mountain of "bullshit." On the Net, people think of anonymity - and the opportunity it presents for them to try on different personae - as liberating. Among the Inuit, those who pretend to be anything other than who they are, who put on airs, immediately lose face.

The Inuit depend on their built-in bullshit meters to know who is and isn't being truthful during face-to-face conversation. The Net, which at present can only transmit text or voice with reasonable efficacy, therefore is of marginal use to them.

"The paradigm of the Web as a metaphor is already understood by the Inuit," Jim explains. "A little window on your desktop for videoconferencing isn't going to cut it for them. What we need up here is cheap, full-screen videoconferencing in every household."

In other words, if a computer and digital access node can enhance the connectivity of the Inuit, they'll use them. If not, well, anyone who has seen an Inuk wait hours, even days, for a seal to emerge from a hole in the ice will realize that these people will patiently await a new generation of tools that can serve their purposes.

Deborah isn't holding her breath for full-suite videotelephony. The Inuit, she says, have been monopolized by the telephone company, the cable company, and virtually every other corporate presence in the North.

"There's this view that the Inuit don't know what's happening," she tells me. "We do know. We already have our web. If we can manipulate this one, we will use it. If we can't, we don't need it."

### **Fort Providence, Northwest Territories**

A town where wild buffalo have been known to try mating with sport utility vehicles is probably the ideal locale for the Arctic's first annual Gathering of the Tundra Techno-Weenies. But Jeremy Childs, an SSI Micro point man, suggests I call this singular event something else.

"If you've got to come up with a smart-ass label, I prefer 'Tundra Geeks.' I don't want people thinking we're weenies!"

Damn straight. These wire-pullers of the Pays d'en Haute - the High Country - are not weenies. This becomes clear to me when they begin discussing a road trip to Edmonton, a 17-hour drive south, to catch the Alberta premiere of the remastered *Star Wars*.

No, these guys are a new breed of frontiersmen, the contemporary Arctic's answer to the *coureurs des bois* ("wood runners"), those fiercely independent bush lopers who first opened up the Canadian North to the fur trade.

During the 17th century, these renegades, most of them from New France, functioned as barely tolerated middlemen between the southern merchants and Indian trappers. After the bush bandits explored uncharted territory and revived a beaver-pelt trade crippled by the French and Indian Wars, they were rechristened *voyageurs* - licensed traders and explorers - only to be squeezed out by southern- and European-based trading concerns.

Similarly, Philipp and his unlikely band of Inuit, Indian, Metis, and qadlunaaq cohorts brought Internet access to small northern communities that had been ignored by the big telecommunications conglomerates. Like the *coureurs*, they created a modest niche as intermediaries between the old North and the new connectivity. Also like the *coureurs*, they quickly found themselves up against well-heeled corporate interests eager to squeeze them out by establishing a monopolistic business empire.

But Philipp and his allies won't go quietly into the Arctic night. They are even contemplating running their own digital pipes into the communities earmarked by Ardicom, using extant earth stations and new installations that could pay for themselves within two years.

Another tack, says Philipp, might be to focus on their strongest suit - customer service. The concerns that make up Ardicom - notably NorthwesTel (the regional phone company), Arctic Cooperatives, and NASCO - are neither lean nor flexible enough to compete with small operators. Guys like Philipp can stop on a dime and offer personalized solutions to individual networking problems.

"But enough of this shit," Philipp intones, hearing the call of the wild as the faint echoes of howling dogs (or wolves) infiltrate his acoustically insulated conference room. "I think Sheli's ready for a close encounter with a buffalo," he says, heading for the stairs.

It is an uncommonly balmy midwinter's eve outside. The mercury has been hovering at about minus 15 degrees Celsius for days. To fend off hypothermia, I sport Israeli Army-issue gatkies, or long johns, a Canadian Army extreme-cold-weather combat parka, fleece Patagonia under- and overgarments, Cabela's subzero snowboots, wind pants, gloves, a face mask, a balaclava, a cap, and enough chemical warmer packs to barbecue a small rabbit.

And so I sit sweating by a roaring fire, wiping buffalo grease from my chin, watching the northern lights do their cosmic tango, and recording the spectacle of Philipp and his associates shooting the blistering Arctic breeze. Told between drafts of high-test brew and mouthfuls of fresh-slaughtered game, these tales sound to me as if they might have been lifted from the pages of a Jack London novel.

"There's a pay phone in the band office," Philipp recounts, "the only phone in town. On the floor there's 10 gallons of gas, a set of moose antlers, an outboard kicker, and a whole bunch of shotgun shells. We carry the computer in and set it on a 3/4-inch sheet of plywood suspended over a couple of sawhorses.

"Suddenly, this kid runs in and shouts, 'There's a moose on the island, there's a moose on the island!' " And the whole band office takes off to hunt the moose. We wait around for a couple of hours, and they're still chasing it. I

figured if that's how they feel, I'd let the moose teach them how to run the computer."

Philipp's guests laugh raucously. In the two years or so since they began jacking bits and pieces of the North into the Net, each has experienced moments in which the immediacies of the taiga or the tundra have conspired to dampen the most pronounced technological fervor.

Tonight, though, is not one of those moments. They will consume astonishing amounts of tobacco, down snorts of fiery white Cuban rum, and chew the caribou fat. And when we're done, I have been told, I can expect to participate in an even more intense Arctic ritual.

"It's time," intones Graham, a laid-back longhair tech from British Columbia. The others get to their feet, totter up the sloping riverbank to the road, cross it, and head down into Philipp's backwoods computer emporium. Stumbling downstairs and through assorted hallways and vestibules, I find a dozen or so PCs networked together in Philipp's sterile computer lab. I am asked to take my place by one of the terminals.

"OK, you qadlunaaq scumbags," says Adamee as he boots up the latest version of the computer shoot-'em-up Quake. "It's time to eat some lead!"

The rest of the night, not surprisingly, is a blur. Most of it is spent wandering a labyrinth of imaginary hallways and shimmering ersatz pools, blasting each other with laser cannons while fuguing on an endless stream of scatological banter.

I ought to emerge from this night full of networked carnage thinking bleak thoughts. The northern future is being shaped, I decide, by a bunch of Gore-Tex geeks who get their jollies recreating My Lai online.

Yet I leave Fort Providence - and eventually the Arctic - concluding that these are precisely the people the North will need to lead them across the digital ice bridge.

These men know the terrain and the climate, they know how to keep from falling through the ice. Most important, they know how to keep the beer cold. As the besotted young King Harry himself might have said of this happy band of hosers: "He today who shares his beer with me - not to mention fresh caribou and a joystick - shall be my brother, eh?"

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